Greek Philosophy, 2001/2, Term 1, Lecture 2

PLATO'S VERSION OF THE THIRD MAN ARGUMENT

Parmenides 132a-b2

(largely, though not wholly, after Gail Fine, On Ideas, OUP 1993, chs 15-16)

Gail Fine renders the Parmenides passage as follows (p. 204):

I suppose it is because of the following sort of thing that you think that (1) each form is one: (2) whenever many things seem large to you, there perhaps seems to you to be, when you have looked at them all, some one and the same idea. Hence you think (3) the large is one.
True, he said.
(4) What, then, if in the same way you look in your soul at all these ? at the large itself and the other large things? (5) Will not some one large appear again, by which all these will appear large?
It seems so.
So another form of largeness will appear besides the large itself and its participants. (6) And in addition to all these, yet another, by which all these will be large. (7) And so each of the forms will no longer be one for you, but infinitely many.

Gregory Vlastos has supplied the following self-predication and non-identity assump-tions:

SPV Any form can be predicated of itself. Largeness is itself large, F-ness is itself.
NIV If anything has a certain character, it cannot be identical with the form in virtue of which we apprehend that character. If x is F, x cannot be identical with F-ness.

Fine suggests these succinct alternative formulations:

SP Any form of F is itself F.
NI Nothing is F in virtue of itself.

How should we best read (2)? We want it to imply NI. Fine goes through these possi-bilities:
(2a) If there is a set of large things, then there is exactly one form of large, and the members of the set are large in virtue of it.
(2b) If there is a set of large things, then there is at least one form of large in virtue of which the members of the set are large.
(2c) There is exactly one form of large in virtue of which all and only the members of the set of large sensibles are large.
OM-TMA For any maximal set of Fs at level n, there is exactly one form of F at level n + 1 over it (where 'over it' means 'participated in by all and only the members of it').

(2a) too clearly implies (3), and so creates a self-contradiction.
(2b) too clearly fails to imply (3).
(2c) doesn't itself yield (5), or imply NI; so it creates no regress.

OM-TMA does better, for it does imply NI, and generate a regress; and at first sight it would make (3) tempting ? but not actually correct.

To escape the regress, Plato needs to deny either SP or NI. If we stress that forms are paradigms, it is natural to assert SP, but deny NI. NI is plausible if we analyse all predication in terms of participation: to participate in a form is to derive some property from it, some property that it transmits to one; and nothing can derive anything from, or transmit anything to, itself. 'x is F' may not be analyzable as 'x participates in the F' when x = the F, and so is F in virtue of itself. Cf. Phaedo 100c4-6: 'If anything else is beautiful besides the beautiful itself, it is beautiful for no reason at all other than that it participates in that beautiful' ? which avoids saying that Beauty participates in itself.

This would provide a further point against OM-TMA: 'x is F' is equivocal, depending on whether x is itself paradigmatic of F-ness; so we cannot expect a single analysis of the F-ness of a set of things, involving reference to a second form, when the set in-cludes both sensibles and a paradigm.

Fine suggests a limitation on OM-TMA and NI (p. 227): if a thing is imperfectly F (viz. F only qualifiedly), then it cannot be F in virtue of itself (since it is unqualifiedly it-self); the form of F is perfectly F; so it can be F in virtue of itself ? which gives us (2c) but not OM-TMA.

A problem is that, on a narrow theory of forms, where we have, e.g., a form of justice but none of man, a particular act-token (though not any natural act-type, such as re-turning what one has borrowed) may well be just without qualification. And on a wide theory of forms, surely an individual man is a man without qualification.

Fine suggests a finer notion of imperfection, viz. impurity: perhaps a just act fails to be perfectly or paradigmatically just in that it is many things other than just, while an indi-vidual man fails to be perfectly or paradigmatically a man in that he is many things other than a man. A paradigm of F-ness is both unqualifiedly F, and nothing but F. This would explain why acquaintance with the form is sufficient for grasping F-ness (and how Plato can escape a variant of Wittgenstein's objection to ostensive definition that it leaves open which aspect of the ostended object is intended): to grasp the form is to grasp the property, since there is nothing else to the form than being a perfect instan-tiation of the property.

Of course, the notion of something that is nothing but a man, or nothing but beautiful, is a nonsense: men (unlike numbers) are essentially subject to accidental predications (though not to any in particular); and beauty is essentially supervenient (dependent, in any particular case, upon some property or properties ? say, the colouring of a sunset ? that constitute it in that case). Hence the notion of a pure paradigm, of a paradigm that is nothing but a paradigm, seems not to apply to such cases.

Cf. Aristotle's dismissal of any Forms answering to accidental predicates (he gives 'white', but more Platonic would be 'good' and 'beautiful'): 'But the things that do not signify a substance must be predicated of some underlying subject, and there cannot be anything white which is not white through

being something different. (For we can say goodbye to the forms; for they are nonny-noes ...)'; Posterior Analytics 1.22.83a30-33, tr. Barnes.